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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the "Survey of Magnet Schools," a study of the effectiveness of such schools in a nationally representative sample of 15 urban school districts. Among the significant findings are the following: (1) between 1981 and 1983 magnet school enrollments ranged from 21 percent to 71 percent white, a slightly higher percentage of white students than district averages; (2) magnet schools share a number of characteristics with "effective schools," including strong leadership, a cohesive curriculum, high expectations, and a consensus among faculty, students, and parents about the goals of their schools; (3) educational quality in magnet schools is at the same level as or higher than that in more traditional schools; (4) the quality of a magnet school depends most on its leadership, institutional coherence, and relationship to the school district; (5) most magnet schools are moderately selective and do not appear to be rejecting the average student; (6) there is little correlation between a magnet school's degree of selectivity and its degree of educational quality or integration; (7) magnet schools have reduced the percentage of students in racially isolated schools from 60 percent to less than 30 percent; and (8) a magnet school that is racially and ethnically integrated is, generally, also a school that provides a highly effective learning environment. This paper concludes with a list of factors found to contribute to the success of a magnet school. (KH)

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URBAN MAGNET SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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Urban Magnet Schools and Educational Excellence

Magnet schools were first conceived and developed in large, urban school districts seeking a voluntary alternative to busing as a means of decreasing racial segregation. Inspired in part by such advanced specialty schools as the Bronx High School of Science, Boston Latin School, and Lane Tech in Chicago, magnet schools also sought to enhance academic performance by drawing together students and staff with the same aptitudes and interests. However, since early magnet schools were based on the voluntarism of alternative schools, they emphasized self-selection and choice rather than testing for admission.

The 1976 amendment to the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA), which authorized grants to support the planning and implementation of magnet schools in desegregating districts, heightened urban interest in these schools and strengthened their close identification with desegregation. By 1981-82, there were 1,019 magnet schools in 138 school districts. Among the ESAA magnet schools, an average of 52.3 percent of the students were racial minorities, compared to an average of 43.9 percent minority students in nonmagnet schools. The grade level proportions in ESAA- and non-ESAA funded districts were similar: about 62 percent were elementary magnets, 14 percent were middle/junior high magnets, and 24 percent were senior high magnets. Total-school magnets were the most prevalent organizational type, accounting for approximately 60 percent at all grade levels; schools-within-schools represented 21 percent of all organizational types, followed by magnet centers (11 percent) and add-on programs (5 percent). More districts had developed magnet programs without federal support (74) than with ESAA funding (64). Moreover, one-third, or 91, of the country's 275 large urban districts (with over 200,000 students) had installed magnet schools.

The repeal in 1981 of the amendment supporting magnets and other desegregation programs severely curtailed federal funding (from $400 million in 1979 to $25 million in fiscal year 1982). As of February, 1984, of the 300 districts most interested in creating or maintaining magnets, 225 were having trouble paying for them.

A Survey of Magnet Schools

The first national study, **Survey of Magnet Schools** (Blank et al. 1983), was conducted between 1981 and 1983. Funded by the United States Department of Education's Office of Planning, Budget and Evaluation, this two-year research project was directed to answer questions about academic effectiveness, desegregation effects, costs, leadership, and community involvement. The study was based on a representative sample of 15 districts, each with a minimum of 3 magnet schools, including at least one secondary-school magnet. A total of 46 school programs were actually studied, including 4 elementary, 6 middle school and 30 secondary school programs, along with 3 for grades 4-12 and 3 for grades 1-12. (Although the study included 46 schools, most percentages are based on 45 schools.)

The magnet school enrollments ranged from 21 percent to 71 percent white, a slightly higher percentage of white students than district averages. School themes included the arts, science, social studies, and occupations/careers, as well as areas not traditionally associated with the notion of a "theme", such as basic skills, college preparation/academics, or other forms of general academic emphases.

Forty-seven percent or 21 magnets were schools-within-schools (part-time add-on or center magnets), while 53 percent or 24 magnets were entire schools. No nonmagnet schools were included in the study; thus, all comparisons are either among magnets or, as in the case of academic achievement, between magnet schools and district averages.

Magnet School Quality

Blank et al. note that magnet schools share a number of characteristics with "effective schools": they tend to have strong leadership, a cohesive curriculum, high expectations, and a consensus among faculty, students, and parents about the goals of their schools.

The **Survey of Magnet Schools** determined educational quality in magnet schools by two types of measures: (1) selected educational process variables, including the activity rate and interaction or communication rate of students and staff on educational matters; the sentiment or sense of community; the congruence between daily tasks and stated goals; and the extent to which both material and symbolic resources were realized; and (2) reading and mathematics achievement test scores. One-third or 15 of the sample schools scored highly on all process measures of educational quality, while 56 percent were grouped around the study mean. Achievement measures differed across districts; however, students in over 80 percent of the magnets equaled or exceeded the reading achievement scores for their districts, and 41 percent exceeded district averages by 10 points or more in mathematics achievement.

Magnet School Characteristics and Educational Quality

Magnet school quality was apparently *not* related to school size, type of theme, or method of organization (total school versus part-school program). Instead, 66 percent of the educational quality in any magnet school could be explained by three factors:

- an innovative, entrepreneurial principal
- a high degree of coherence of the theme, curriculum, teaching methods, and staff to form a strong program identity.
- special treatment by district administration-including extra funding ($200 more per student in magnets than nonmagnets in 1980-81, but only $59 more in 1981-82), flexibility in allowing the principal autonomy for planning and implementation and the staff time for design and development, and variation from standard school-district procedures.

Magnet Schools and Selectivity

The debate over magnet school selectivity and its appropriateness to public education has continued since the inception of these schools. The **Survey of Magnet Schools** found four types of selectivity occurring in varying degrees and combinations in the magnet schools studied: (1) student self-selection, which is inherent in the magnet concept; (2) market focus, which is expressed in the ways in which magnets are marketed to the community and consumers; (3 applicant screening, which may include both behavioral and academic standards for admissions; and (4) post-entry mechanisms for transferring students who do not perform or behave in accordance with the magnet's standards.

Using a selectivity index, the study found that 89 percent of the magnet schools in the sample screen out certain types of applicants. However, only a small proportion (13 percent) were highly selective. Most magnet schools (75 percent) were, in fact, only moderately selective. Their characteristic criteria for admissions were (1) academic performance at grade level, and (2) no immediately apparent evidence of serious social or behavioral problems, such as poor attendance or frequent disciplinary actions. Hence, the authors assert that these schools "do not appear to be rejecting the average student" (p. 60). At the other end of the spectrum, 11 percent are nonselective, or "virtually open-admissions schools, although student self-selectivity and marketing focus may blunt the openess to at least some degree" (p. 61).

Selectivity and Educational Quality

The degree of selectivity of the various magnet schools was not related to their educational quality (the combination of educational process measures and achievement scores); however, selectivity was moderately associated with students' higher reading and mathematics achievement scores. Magnet schools that were rated as having a high quality of education, as measured by the educational process variables, had both average- and high-ability students. While all 6 of the highly selective magnets were rated as having a high quality of education, 46 percent of the other magnets also were rated highly on educational quality. More important, the magnets with the highest academic achievement were not highly selective.

While there was some relationship between theme and selectivity (most of the highly selective schools had an academic emphasis), the correlation was not as strong as might be expected, presumably because some of the academic-theme schools were compensatory in nature. However, the authors also noted that the other theme schools were sprinkled throughout the selectivity levels, and that, at least in the case of one art magnet, applicants were ranked according to three descending academic levels--and students in each group were systematically admitted.

Selectivity and Magnet Desegregation

Critics have charged that, because magnet schools are partially selective, the magnet system may easily lead to new, informal methods of tracking and racial segregation. The **Survey of Magnet Schools** found that effectiveness in desegregating or providing racial integration within the magnet was not related to how the schools admitted students, nor was there a correlation between school theme and racial mix. Although some magnets actually worked against desegregation, or merely acted symbolically in dealing with concern about racial segregation, the successful use of magnet schools reduced the percentage of students in racially isolated schools from an average of 60 percent to less than 30 percent. Moreover, the quality of integration in a magnet was associated with five factors having little to do with selectivity:

(1) the racial/ethnic composition of the school system and the surrounding city: magnets with from 26 to 58 percent black students had the highest integration scores
(2) principal quality: principals who ran effective magnet schools and programs tended to induce student and staff integration as one part of that effectiveness
(3) special treatment by the superintendent and school district
(4) coherence and integrity of the school program and staff
(5) correspondence between what the magnet was in (observable) fact and how it described itself on paper

Racial Integration and Educational Quality

Data from the **Survey of Magnet Schools** suggest that a racially and ethnically *integrated* magnet school is also a magnet with a highly effective learning environment. Although desegregation itself is not correlated with learning outcomes, "magnet schools are most productive of student achievement gains and of high quality learning environments where they are highly integrated" (p. 110). Moreover, the researchers' measures of integration were significantly correlated with both reading and mathematics achievement.

Effective Urban Magnet Schools

Blank et al. cite the following factors as contributing to the success of a magnet school and urge their inclusion in the designs of educational planners:

- district-wide access for students on the basis of voluntary preference
- a curricular theme that is definite, appealing, and distinctive
- a principal and a staff composed and disposed to deliver on that theme, as advertised
- instruction that is reviewed by the district for its rigor and fairness (accountability)
- a facility and site chosen for their racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic neutrality
- good transportation and school security services
- student and staff composition that closely reflects the racial and ethnic composition of the system
- a method of checks and balances that will prevent segregation or service deprivation in nonmagnet schools
- startup funds for facilitating early success and implementation

This paper summarizes **Survey of Magnet Schools: Analyzing a Model for Quality Integrated Education.** Final Report of a National Study, by Rolf K. Blank et al. (ABT Associates, Inc., Cambridge, MA, and James H. Lowry and Associates, Washington, DC., September, 1983 .28p., ERIC Document Number ED 236 304).

Availability of Documents Cited

Publications with an ED number may be read in microfiche in any library, information center, or other institution that has an ERIC microfiche collection. They may also be purchased in either microfiche or paper copy from ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS), P.O. Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210.

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